

# **MISSION AS LIBERATION AND JUSTICE**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In the history of mission, the understanding of mission and its role have undergone several imperative changes. A variety of mission perspectives has evolved throughout the centuries. From the time of Pietism, mission was mostly seen “from above” perspective. Mission was aimed at evangelism, conversion, and salvation of souls. In the mid of twentieth century, mission came to be seen “from below” perspective in Latin America, which had its root in Marxism. Since then, Mission began to focus on human concerns and their quest for justice. The spirit of liberation began to sweep across giving rise to political theology, in other words, “liberation theology.” The liberation theology seeks to interpret the Christian faith from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. Liberation theologies struggle with issues of faith and post-colonial deprivation, searching for hope in a world of poverty. The people who are oppressed ask, according to H. M. Conn, “Where is the God of righteousness in a world of injustice?”[1]

While, the evangelicals mainly have been emphasizing spiritual liberation throughout the centuries, the liberation theologians stressed the socio-economic liberation of human beings from their bondage. In spite of all the limitations of liberation theology, it has helped the church to rediscover its ancient faith in God and to see God as the God of righteousness and justice. This paper is an attempt to study the holistic understanding of liberation and justice by assessing the contemporary understanding of major liberation concepts.

## **II. HISTORICAL ROOTS AND DEVELOPMENTS**

Liberation is not a new term in the history of the Bible. Liberation played a pivotal part in the soteriology of the Old Testament. It appears especially in the exodus tradition and during the time after the exile. In the Old Testament, Liberation implies deliverance from an evil situation by the aid of Yahweh and not by human means. The concern of social justice is not only seen in the Old Testament prophets, but also in Jesus' own proclamation concerning his mission of liberation for the oppressed (Lu 4:18-21). The New Testament concepts of Liberation and freedom become clearer when we examine the liberating action of Jesus and his message of the reign of God. Jesus freed humanity from the slavery of sin, but this also had implications for social concerns. According to Heribert Bettscheider, “From Patristic times the subject of liberation is treated predominantly within the context of redemption.”[2] The orientation towards liberation was built from several new theological dimensions. First, the development of an “Option for the Poor” was a conscious decision to see the poor as the favoured of God. Second, the socio-political liberation of Israel through exodus was a paradigm of God’s liberating desire for humankind. Third, the concept of sin evolved into a corporate factor, not just limited to personal, individual rebellion toward God. In addition, salvation was defined as redemption of the whole person rather than some isolated interior

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“soulful” element of the person. Finally, true Christian praxis[3] was defined in terms of a lifestyle of moving peoples and societies toward justice for all members, and mission was recast as committed solidarity with the oppressed in their struggle.[4]

Stockholm 1925, the first Church and society conference of Ecumenical movement, focused on social problems of West and the East (Marxist). Confronted by Nazism in the 1930’s, the Church in Germany slowly began to realize the evil structures of their society. Tambaram (1938) was another conference, which focused on the wider structures and called for radical renewal. In 1968, the Uppsala Assembly devoted an entire section to “World Economic and Social Development.” [5] It gave the strongest urgency to Christian involvement in this worldwide struggle for meaning, dignity, freedom and love. The above conferences were conducted mostly from the above perspectives.

The term liberation theology was first coined in 1968, but received widespread usage following publication in English of *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutierrez in 1973. However, K.H. Ting of China as a Christian student leader expressed the liberationist concern for a theology relevant to social revolution in 1949. Latin American Catholic bishops, at their Second General Conference (Medellin, 1968), affirmed the biblical basis of that authentic liberation for which they prayed.

World Council of Churches adopted the liberation theology first in Bangkok in 1973 and then in Nairobi during 1975. At its Fifth Assembly (Nairobi 1975), the WCC judged the goals of the UN’s decade for development in the 1960s as inadequate and called upon the churches “to share with the oppressed their struggles for liberation.” Pope Paul VI’s apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), while focusing on the imperative and task of evangelisation, included a clear affirmation that evangelisation and human advancement (development and liberation) are inextricably linked together.[6] In the mean time, third World theologians embraced the new paradigm in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) conference of 1976, calling upon theologians to be committed “to a lifestyle of solidarity with the poor and the oppressed and involved in action with them.” A key theme of liberation theology, the preferential option for the poor, was first articulated from the 1975 conference of Latin American bishops held in Puebla, Mexico.[7] Although liberation theologies originated in Latin America, they soon developed on other continents. Allan Boesak of South Africa, in 1981, affirmed his faith in God who demands love, justice, reconciliation, and shalom for the world.

As developed over the decades since the second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965) in Roman Catholic and ecumenical Protestant circles, most of the reflections on and praxis toward liberation were reactions to the understandings of development, political environments, and the theological ideologies of the past. According to A. Scott Moreau, “Liberation theology often, though not always, oriented in Marxist thought, the tools for understanding liberation are not limited to theology but include Anthropology, Economics, and Sociology.”[8]

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Liberation struggles that began initially against colonial rulers have slowly begun to turn against the new oppressive regimes that are often backed by one or the other competing global powers, unconcerned with the masses. According to Moreau, "Theologically it was noted that any system which did not attack the oppressive status quo was ideologically suspect in and of itself, as it did not embody the aim of true liberation, which is a holistic release of people from all oppression and injustice." [9]

### III. MAJOR LIBERATION CONCEPTS

With strong root and development, in recent times, liberation theology has been one of the most influential theologies of mission "from below," which is based on a quest for justice. Gustavo Gutierrez, father of liberation theology, in his book, *A Theology of Liberation*, says that liberation theology "is a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation, and to build a different society, free and more human."

The theology of liberation attempts to reinterpret the Gospel in the light of modern knowledge and up-to-date concepts. [10] According to J.B. Libanio, "Liberation theology breaks with traditional and conservative theology by its hermeneutical starting position." [11]

It is important to know the concepts of liberation theology before we assess those with the holistic understanding of liberation and justice.

#### The Interpretation of Scripture

The liberation theologians support their view through the account of the Exodus from Egypt and Luke's fourth chapter telling about Jesus "preaching deliverance to the captives . . . and to set at liberty them that are bruised" (Luke 4:18).

The Good Samaritan parable of Jesus is interpreted as an example for a true human. The good Samaritan is the one who becomes a true human in serving others.

Jesus challenges his hearers through the story to choose whether they are going to continue with their traditional prejudice, which wanted to limit their neighbour-love to fellow Jews or whether they will accept Jesus' revolutionary attitude, which is that, our love should be even for our enemies (Mt. 5:44). [12]

#### The Meaning of Salvation

Gutierrez defined salvation in terms of building the new society by and through politics. The liberation concept of salvation is defined in collective terms to the virtual exclusion of individual redemption. To liberationists, the "group" salvation is so important because they need the corporate strength of "the church community" to resist the world's powerful institutions.

#### The Sinful Nature of Man

Sin is seen either as usurpation (infringing on other rights; unauthorized, arbitrary arrogation of power; arrogating into one-self God's authoring) or as dryness of the soul (thoughtless submission to injustice, blind accommodation). [13] Personal sin is acknowledged, but they say it exists because of oppressive political and social structures. Liberation theologians say that sin is the result of a bad social and political system, and thus the overthrow of the

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oppressive structures is the primary goal of the new theology.

In another of looking, social sin is, after all, simply a conglomerate of personal sin. Society does not commit acts of torture, murder, and rape. People do. Therefore, society can only be changed when people are changed.

#### The Mission of the Church

The mission of the church is described exclusively in terms of political liberation. Gutierrez says that the poor, the diseased, the illiterate, the ignorant, and the hopeless - were not intended by God to be poor and he says, "They were made poor." Gutierrez goes on to explain that the social system is the enemy. The worst social system is capitalism. Gutierrez calls it "developmentalism"; or "colonialism," which must be uprooted.

#### The Teaching on Adversity

The enemy of humanity is not nature, but the structures made by human, which exploits and destroys the powerless.[14] Therefore, the political structure has to be uprooted to avoid hardships.

#### Classless Society

Liberationists have chosen to follow the theories adopted by Karl Mark. Poverty is a result of class society, they say, and people are poor because others are rich. The solution is to revolt against the evil rich, take what they have, and give it to poor.[15]

Liberation theology looks always the side of the poor, however, it has not dealt with the gospel to the rich. If the oppressed has to revolt against the social structure, what is the role of the rich? If social structures have to be changed, how the society will survive? There is no proper answer from the liberation theologians for many questions. Bible says that the master has to treat the slave with care and concern as though he were a son and it encourages the slave to work with dignity and diligence as unto the Lord. To understand the social structure and its proper functions F. Hrangkhuma quotes the story of Philemon and Onesimus in the book of Philemon.

### IV. MISSION AS LIBERATION AND JUSTICE

Liberation is one of the key themes of the Bible. F. F. Bruce, a New Testament scholar has called Apostle Paul, "the Apostle of Freedom." Within Pauline writings the key conviction is that 'Christ set us free, to be free people...(Gal 5:1). This is an evangelical view. According to Andrew Kirk,

Liberation is impossible without redemption. A price has to be paid to atone for both sin (idolatry) and sins (injustices and oppressions). Human beings cannot pay the price themselves, either by moral earnestness, political action or compassion for the distressed. Only the son of God, totally free of all idolatry and injustice, could alone, by becoming a sin offering (Rom 8:3).[16]

Even though, the Christian Church spoke of spiritual liberation, it has not spoken actively for the removal of corporate sins of the society. David Bosch rightly puts, "Churches tended to claim a sort of 'extra-territoriality', a position above the flux and conflicts of history, merely

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spelling out gospel principles. It was agreed that social ills had to be remedied, but without challenging societal and political macrostructures.”[17]

As a result, the theology of liberation rose, manifesting itself as black, Hispanic and American theologies in the United States, as Latin American theology, as feminist theology, South African black theology, as Dalit theology in India, and various analogous theological movements in other parts of Africa, Asia and South Pacific.

Kirk views liberation as one model of salvation in the New Testament. He notes that liberation speaks of freedom from the authority and power of the law, sin, the powers and, eventually, of death itself. However, it is far from being an abstract ideal.”[18] In this situation, one has to clearly understand the emphasis of liberation theology. The essential emphasis of Liberation theology as a Christian reflection on “freedom and liberation” has been that human liberation is of one piece. Liberation, as it affects human beings, cannot be divided into an inner and an outer realm. In this sense, it has become a protest against the long tradition of thought in both the West and East that attitudes and intentions can be substitutes for actual change in society. It is also a powerful protest against the churches for making liberation into something purely individual, internal, otherworldly and future. In that case, another question can be asked, what is the relationship of evangelism and liberation theology? Are they antithetical emphasis in Christian thought and action, or reciprocal understandings of Christian responsibility?

Norman E. Thomas quotes Gutierrez, which is quoted by Anderson and Stransky and affirms that

Liberation theology is also an act of prayer, of worship and of contemplation, but in the midst of politics and economics where all of us live. It seeks to evoke a dynamic evangelism and mission that embody God's justice. Its motto is struggle and contemplation.[19]

If evangelism is just the proclamation of God's justice, what is the relation between word and deed in evangelism? Should we follow Jesus' acts of healing evangelism or only his verbal call for persons to repent and be reconciled to God? enquires Norman E. Thomas. Thomas tells that many classic statements of evangelism are narrow definitions emphasizing verbal proclamation and verbal response. The Lausanne Covenant, for example, states:

To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for sins... and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the spirit to all who repent and believe. Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism... but evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Savior and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God.[20]

However, Liberation theologians reject any narrow definition of evangelization and the methods derived from it. Gutierrez argues that God's saving activity as revealed in scripture begins with involvement in the struggle for liberation of his people. The proclamation of the word of the Lord has significance only in that context, for “God is a liberating God, revealed

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only in the concrete historical context of liberation of the poor and oppressed.”[21] In that case, evangelism is ‘understanding of word and action’. Moreover, the gospel has to be introduced to the oppressed as changing evil social structures.

In Old Testament, in the perspective of the reign of God and following the paradigm of the Jubilee, mission is, in the first place, the proclamation of liberation, the announcement of the Lord’s year of liberation. A total liberation: historical one eternal, material and spiritual. Interestingly, this fact has been misunderstood and spiritualised by some of the evangelicals. Liberation should be from the concrete forms of oppression, like economic (return to the land, cancellation of debts), social (emancipation of slaves) as well as spiritual (forgiveness of sins from God). Jesus’ proclamation of liberation did not stop with the forgiveness of sins, but went on to the liberation from sickness and false relationships. Mortimer Arias agrees that Mission cannot limit itself to the ministry of absolution “the power of the keys” for verbal confession, we are called to declare God’s total release, to unbind those bound in concrete historical shackles of oppression. The Modellin conference calls us to engage in the tasks of liberation of “all forms of oppression.”[22]

The emphasis among liberation theologians on collective sin and corporate salvation contributes to a holistic understanding of mission. While quoting Gutierrez, Thomas notes: In the liberation approach, sin is not considered as an individual, private or merely interior reality – asserted just enough to necessitate a “spiritual” redemption, which does not challenge the order in which we live. Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of [fellowship] and love in relationships among [persons], the breach of friendship with God and with [others], and therefore, an interior, personal fracture. When it is considered in this way, the collective dimensions of sin are rediscovered.[23]

Reflecting on Gutierrez's view in *Evangelicals and Liberation*, Stephen Knapp writes: He (Gutierrez) absolutely right in denouncing as unbiblical the church's individualization and spiritualization of salvation and its privatization of sin.[24] However, one thing is clear that liberation theology has opened the eyes of the church to count sin as individual as well as corporate, which should lead to corporate salvation.

At the Lausanne Congress, Samuel Escobar gave the same interpretation in his speech on “Evangelism and the World.” He called for a repentance ethic. It would include the recognition that the call to repent comes to a person enslaved by sin in a concrete social situation – not to a sinner in the abstract. Therefore, evangelism includes calling not just the individual but also the entire community to repentance.

Consistent with the emphasis in liberation theologies upon collective sin and corporate salvation is the emphasis on the gospel and the church of the poor. Gutierrez understands the church as a sacrament of salvation that points beyond itself to what salvation is all about. Thomas quotes Gutierrez, “to preach the good News is for the church to be a sacrament of history, to fulfill its role as community – a sign of the convocation of all... by God.”

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Moreover, The mission to which the church is called is “to bring the good news (evangelism) to the poor” (Lk 4:18) and to join Christ in proclaiming liberty to captives, in healing and freeing the oppressed.[25]

In a world undergoing rapid social change and dislocations in which gaps between the rich and poor appear generally to be widening both within and among nations, the theologians of liberation bring a new (or renewed) definition to the evangelistic task. Thomas quotes Letty Russell and reveals that the liberationists are helping us to see the way actions of evangelization may be truly part of God's liberating purpose and the way struggles for liberation may be truly part of God's mission.[26] This renewed emphasis on liberation is a fundamental biblical concept. The God of Moses and Elijah and Jesus is actively involved in the events of history, liberating the destitute and oppressed and calling individuals to repentance and trust in God. Liberation theologies at their best reaffirm liberation as a biblical concept in all its wholeness. However, it has its own flaws. Chris Sudgen while quoting M. M. Thomas says,

The outcasts, the poor and the orphans saw Christian faith as the source of a new humanising influence and the foundation of a human community. Where conversion was genuine, whether of individuals or of groups, the converts saw salvation in Christ not only in terms of individual salvation, of heaven after death, but also as the spiritual source of a new community on earth in which their humanity and status were recognised. It was the promise of humanization inherent in the gospel of salvation, which led to the influx of the oppressed into the church.[27]

When we say mission as liberation and justice, it includes the evangelical view of spiritual liberation, which is vertical, and the horizontal view of physical liberation. Visser ‘t Hooft emphasises, “No horizontal advance without vertical orientation”. In addition, Hooft describes the great tension between the vertical interpretation of the Gospel as essentially concerned with God’s saving action in the life of individuals, and the horizontal interpretation of it as mainly concerned with human relationships in the world. According to Hooft, We must get out of that rather primitive oscillating movement of going from one extreme to the other, which is not worthy of a movement, which by its nature seeks to embrace the truth of the Gospel in its fullness. A Christianity, which has lost its vertical dimension, has lost its salt and is not only insipid in itself, but useless for the world. But a Christianity which would use the vertical preoccupation as a means to escape from its responsibility for and in the common life of [humanity] is a denial of the incarnation, of God’s love for the world manifested in Christ. [28]

In balancing the liberation view, Hooft believes that the whole secret of the Christian faith is that it is human-centred because it is God-centred. We cannot speak of Christ as the person for others without speaking of him as the one who came from God and who lived for God. Liberation movements, which stress political action and systematic change, tend toward a

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humanistic utopianism that overlooks both the perversity of the human heart and the power of God's action within history. On the other hand, movements for evangelization which seek merely the conversion of individuals without challenging those structures of power which oppress the poor and the powerless fall short of the holistic gospel in Scripture. Each is a false gospel.[29]

There is a growing consensus among Christians on the reciprocity between evangelism and Christian service, between proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and participation in human liberation... According to Emilio Castro,

There can be no proclamation of the gospel without commitment to God's mission, which includes justice, liberation, and service. Christians [cannot] participate in God's liberating mission or in different forms of service to the community unless [their] life and witness are focused on the hidden reason for [their] participation, as well as on the ultimate secret of the liberation process within [themselves].[30]

Hrangkhuma in "Interrogating Biblical Holism in Mission" gives three important models together for holistic mission approach. According to him, the redemptive, liberative, and ecological models are inter-related and inter-dependent upon each. None of these models has meaning apart it each other.[31]

More than any other formula love can play a major role in liberation and justice. The religious ethic of love will always aim at leavening the idea of justice with the ideal of love; it will prevent it from becoming purely political, with the ethical element washed out.

According to Bosch, love demands more than justice.[32] Even the bible says that love cover all the sins.

## V. CONCLUSION

Liberation is not temporary but it extends beyond the grave. The oppressors of the kingdom community are strictly warned and condemned by the Holy Spirit in the book of James. God is against all forms of oppression. James encourages believers to stand firm in their faith until last. However, we have been called upon God to work with him in the fulfilment of his purposes for humanity as a whole. In carrying out God's mission, we cannot opt permanently for one aspect of mission or another, be it liberation, development, humanization, or evangelization. These are all essential, integral parts of the mission entrusted to us and cannot be set against one another without becoming, simply, pictures of what they really are. Indeed, they exist as parts only, and can only be discovered or recognized separately within the framework of their interrelatedness. However, sincere Christians, motivated by love, must work for the change of social evils. Jesus' commandments 'love one another' can solve most of the injustice issues, when we practice it.

[1] H. M. Conn, "Liberation Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 387.

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- [2] Heribert Bettscheider, "Liberation" in Dictionary of Missions: Theology, History, Perspectives ed. Karl Muller et.al (New York: Orbis books, 1999), 269 - 273.
- [3] From the Greek *praxis* (meaning "to work"), *praxis* involves revolutionary action on behalf of the poor and oppressed. *Praxis* refers to the discovery and formation of theological "truth" out of a given historical situation through personal participation in the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed.
- [4] A. Scott Moreau, "Liberation" in Evangelical Dictionary of Missions ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 574.
- [5] David Bosch, Transforming Mission. Paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 433-434.
- [6] Norman E. Thomas ed., Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 136-137.
- [7] Bosch, 433-435.
- [8] Moreau, 573.
- [9] Moreau, 574.
- [10] Harold S. Martin, "Fallacies of Liberation Theology" in <http://www.brfwitness.org/articles.htm>; Internet, accessed on March 10, 2005.
- [11] J. B. Libanio, "Liberation theology" in Dictionary of Missions: Theology, History, Perspectives ed. Karl Muller et.al (New York: Orbis books, 1999), 278.
- [12] David Wenham, "How Jesus Understood the Last Supper: a Parable in Action," in [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article\\_supper\\_dwenham.html](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_supper_dwenham.html); Internet, accessed on March 24, 2005.
- [13] Frederick Herzog, God-Walk. Liberation Shaping Dogmatics (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 41.
- [14] Bosch, 439.
- [15] J. Ronald Blue, "Major Flaws in Liberation Theology," in Vital Missions Issues. Examining Challenges and Changes in World Evangelism, edited by Roy B. Zuck (Secunderabad: OM Books, 2002), 182.
- [16] Andrew Kirk, The oppressed, Liberation and Good News to the poor, (Madras: CLS, 1985), 20-21.
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- [17] Bosch, 433.
- [18] Kirk, 18-22.
- [19] Norman E. Thomas, "Evangelism and Liberation Theology," in *Missiology: An International Review*, IX, (October 1981), 473.
- [20] Ibid, 476-477.
- [21] Ibid, 477.
- [22] Mortimer Arias, "Mission and Liberation" in *International Review of Mission*, LXXIII (Jan 1984); 45.
- [23] Thomas, "Evangelism and Liberation Theology," 478-479.
- [24] Ibid.
- [25] Thomas, "Evangelism and Liberation Theology," 480-481.
- [26] Ibid, 481- 482.
- [27] Chris Sugden "What is Good about Good News to the Poor?" in *Mission as Transformation. A Theology of the Whole Gospel*, eds. Vinay Samuel and Christ Sugden (New Delhi: Regnum Books, 1999), 242.
- [28] Visser 't Hooft, "Incarnation and Social Concern" in *Classic text in mission and world Christianity*, ed. Norman E. Thomas, (New York: Orbis books, 1998), 139.
- [29] Thomas, "Evangelism and Liberation Theology," 482.
- [30] Emilio Castro, "Proclamation and Liberation" in *Classic Text in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Norman E. Thomas (New York: Orbis books, 1998), 146.
- [31] F. Hrangkhuma, "Interrogating Biblical Holism in Mission" in *Methodological Issues in Missiology: A Reader, Compendium*, SAIACS, Bangalore, 2005, 15.
- [32] Bosch, 403.

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